


Zero



G

When
Gravity
Becomes
Form

**Whitney Museum of American Art
at Champion**







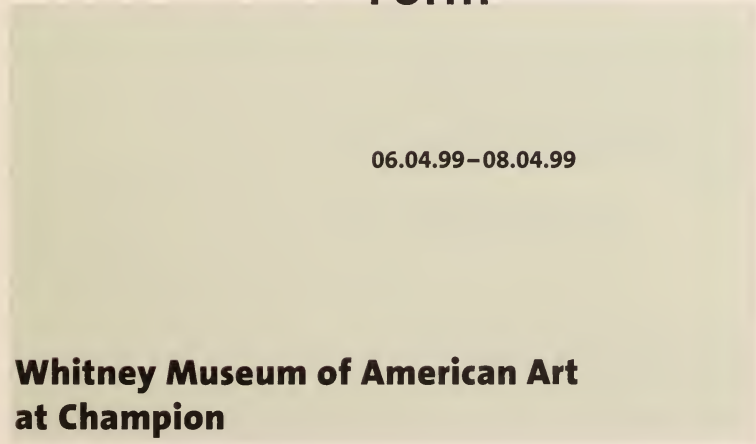
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06.04.99–08.04.99

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06 04 99 - 08 04 99

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When Gravity Becomes Form

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When the world witnessed Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin bouncing around on the surface of the moon on July 29, 1969, the effects of gravity—or in this case, reduced gravity—became vivid in our minds. Each of the astronauts' steps had to be calculated, as the force they used to push themselves forward could send them upward instead. The televised image of the space walk gave the concept of an earthbound existence new meaning.

New aesthetic paths were also being forged that changed the way the public experienced and interpreted contemporary art. The Postminimal and Conceptual art movements were liberating art from its static and esoteric presence in galleries and museums by shifting emphasis from the object to the idea. Heightened interactivity with media and the audience was creating a discursive space that redirected conventional ideas about where and how art could be seen.

"Zero-G: When Gravity Becomes Form" focuses on art that suggests alternative ways of reading the familiar through an exploration of gravity. The aeronautical term "zero-G" alludes to maintaining a physical equilibrium between gravity and the condition of arrested motion known as antigravity. Accordingly, the art in this exhibition

Ko'an Jeff Baysa
Eva Diaz
Michelle-Lee White

Introduction

depicts transitional moments — snapshots, as it were, of interaction with gravity. To best reveal the artistic investigation of this state, the works selected use the full dimensions of the exhibition space: there are floor, wall, and suspended pieces, and most of them touch a number of media, from video and video-derived photography to figurative and organically abstract paintings.

The works, moreover, can be read on historical, theoretical, or scientific levels that together provide a new frame of reference for understanding and interpretation. Eva Diaz's essay takes a comparative historical approach to the 1960s and the 1990s, exploring uses of gravity from their conceptual foregrounding in Postminimalism to their literal effects in more recent work. Ko'an Jeff Baysa investigates gravity as an invisible force whose presence is visualized in contemporary art through its actions and effects. Michelle-Lee White's essay focuses on gravity in contemporary art as the recorded communication of a lived experience with natural phenomena.

The work in "Zero-G: When Gravity Becomes Form" contemplates a profound human relationship to the natural world. The visual articulation of this relationship is tempered with creative twists and turns that direct our attention to the form of the communication. Yet, gravity unites everyone and everything in a common dependence upon and resistance to the magnetism of the earth. By shaping our physical motion, gravity becomes a creative force, an authoritative energy with which the artists in the exhibition engage, whether as collaborators or resisters.

Gravity anchors objects in relation to fields of mass. This seemingly innocuous property of existence nonetheless weighs heavily in the practice of art, which manifests such physical and intangible aspects of gravity as floating/falling, liquidity/rigidity, and action/inertia. Some artists foreground gravity as central to a work's conception, while others use it for its often startling effects. Despite the diverse range of the artists' interpretations, there seem to be two main trajectories: one a sculptural and conceptualized use of gravity, the other a more two-dimensional, literal performance of gravity.

The movement in the late 1960s toward a Postminimalist aesthetic sensibility¹ reflects the first, conceptualized trajectory where artists interrogated notions of softness, pliability, and formlessness as integral to both the creation and effect of a work of art. As artist Robert Morris stated: "An object hung on the wall does not confront gravity; it timidly resists it. One of the conditions of knowing an object is supplied by the sensing of the gravitational force acting upon it in actual space."²

Many artists of this period, among them Morris, Louise Bourgeois, and Lynda Benglis, acted on a similar impetus, freeing the work of art from representational and exclusively aesthetic concerns and instead emphasizing its

Gravity's Draw: A Look at the 1960s and the 1990s

Eva Diaz

relationship to external conditions—to the viewer, the space around it, or its process of creation. They often used malleable, molten, or heavy materials to enact a physical and temporal representation of the effects of gravity. For example, in *Soft Landscape I* (1967), Bourgeois imagines what the puddling and localization of intense gravitational pull might look like, as she depicts a tiny plastic diorama of undifferentiated softened forms melted and fused by the insufferable pressure of heightened density and weight. The object's lack of armature or support, which drives it toward a state of entropy and chaos, is closely linked with the perceived effects of gravity. Similarly, Benglis' *Wing* (1969) and Morris' *Untitled* (1974; but close in appearance to works created

in the late 1960s) tackle the sculptural depiction of an object in the process of losing its structural integrity—sculpture made subject to the constraints of gravity's downward pull. For Benglis, a normative relationship to gravity is violated in favor of the impossibly frozen instant, as poured aluminum, launched from the wall, remains forever fixed in a moment of descent. In Morris' *Untitled*, two strips of coarse gray felt are tacked to separate ends of the wall. Connected at mid-point, they form a sagging rendition of a gravity-inflected chain link; their tenuous interlacing prevents a total capitulation to gravity's force.

One of the immediate historical precursors to this

Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1974



© Lynda Benglis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



Lynda Benglis, *Wing*, 1969

trend in art of the late 1960s was Claes Oldenburg, whose *Soft Toilet* (1966) evokes the possibility of familiar objects gone strange. Using new sculptural materials such as vinyl, Oldenburg created limp and lifeless replicas of household staples that become dissolved by the powerful dematerialization of gravity's draw. Aligned with this tendency is Richard Serra's 1968 *Prop*, where the balanced arrangements of weighty objects precariously manages to counteract gravity. Employing lead, one of nature's densest materials, *Prop* is a reminder that opposition to gravity is indeed possible, albeit contingent and ultimately uncertain.

During the 1970s and 1980s, artists' interest in con-

ceptual explorations of gravity seems to have abated. It was only in the 1990s that artists again began to probe gravity's effects on sculptural objects. Postminimalism's juxtaposition of the bodily and the synthetic, the familiar and the strange, seems particularly fruitful for contemporary artists, laden as it is with ambiguity and inconsistency, yet provoking playful reassessments. Looking anew at the 1960s, artists such as Ernesto Neto, Charles Long, and Lee Boroson are creating objects that surrender structural coherence, reverting to a state of inertia or horizontality. Appropriating the soft materials of Postminimalism, such as rubber, latex, and vinyl, these recent efforts are fraught with a similar ambivalence about the ability of an object to resist gravity's attraction.

In Neto's *Poff* (1997), a powder-filled, droopy disklike form has dodged structural responsibility, locating itself in an inert pile. Long's *Blow-up* (1995) consists of a vertical pole approximately 4 1/2 feet high that maintains perfect rigidity until it reaches floor level, where it becomes irrepressible and disorganized, twisting and buckling against the flawless uniformity of its upper hemisphere. Boroson, in his pliant *Chair* (1995), affixes a many-legged creature to the wall, allowing its tendrils to drip and dangle to the floor. Only by reflecting on the title and carefully appraising the object, does one realize that this alien creature in fact represents a sagging chair. Like Oldenburg before him, Boroson inserts the flaccid where once existed rigidity, retaining the recognizable within

defamiliarized conditions. Responding to Postminimalist work of the late 1960s, Neto, Long, and Boroson employ a remarkably similar visual vocabulary, accentuating the soft, slack qualities of sculpture that has been transformed by gravity.

Representations of gravity, according to Yve-Alain Bois, operate "against the traditional verticality of the visual field of paintings,"³ reorienting the subjective experience of the spectator toward new possibilities of interpretation. Although usually accomplished through sculptural means, this conceptualized assault on verticality can also, in certain circumstances, be achieved through two-dimensional works that re-situate the viewer in a

Ernesto Neto, *Poff*, 1997



relationship that challenges stable readings of the upright, vertical field. Mounting such an attack, Michal Rovner's images of vaguely defined bodies seen in a state of free-fall against ambiguous backdrops locate the spectator in a warped and impossibly subordinate position. The silhouetted forms have no stable orientation—they linger transfixed in an equivocal moment of either ascent or descent. Likewise, Paul Henry Ramirez's liquid paintings render vertical what can only be comprehended in the horizontal—aqueous strokes, dripping and fluid, yet somehow crystallized in unrealizable wall-bound situations.

Overall, much of the work in the "conceptualized" category is nonrepresentational and rarely attempts overt allusions to the body. Yet a more literal, two-dimensional, and often more performative direction can also be mapped. In works from the late 1960s by Robert Rauschenberg and Vito Acconci, gravity is literalized as falling in a very human sense—the body's motion is enforced by the physical constraints of gravity. In *Autobiography* (1967), Rauschenberg

collages documentation from a prior performance art piece in which, strapped to a parachuteline contraption, he unsuccessfully attempts to impel his body to flight in a move reminiscent of early aviation ventures. Acconci likewise alludes to the pitfalls of counteracting gravity: *Throw* (1969) is a series of prints photographed, as the accompanying text notes, "holding a camera while reaching back as if to throw a ball." Acconci here records the skewed "vision" of an object as it temporarily leaves the earth.

Several artists in the 1990s picked up on this tendency, among them Martin Kersels and Tom Friedman. *Untitled (Falling Photos-Triptych)* (1994–96) portrays Kersels, leaning at precarious angles, captured just prior to his loss of balance and inevitable fall. Friedman's *Untitled* (1994) depicts an anxious moment of resistance to gravity: a man impossibly pinned face first to the ceiling, seemingly oblivious to his untenable position. Both Kersels and Friedman treat the bodily sensation of falling as Rauschenberg and Acconci had, accentuating the body's defiance,

opposite page: Peter Garfield, *Mobile Home (Manifest Destiny)*, 1996

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Gravity's Draw
A Look at the 1960s and the 1990s

David Lauder

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Erwin Wurm, *One Minute Sculptures (Suitcase on Woman)*, 1998

and inevitable compliance, to the demands of gravity. Peter Garfield, although he depicts objects rather than humans in a state of free-fall, also makes gravity literal. In *Mobile Home (Manifest Destiny)* (1996), his plunging house, photographed a mere moment before disaster, starkly contrasts with its placid desert

surroundings—a straightforward depiction of a whimsical and wholly preposterous situation.

Beyond a mere depiction of the “fall,” gravity in a literalized representational structure can also elucidate the body's interaction with weight and overburdened

physicality, evoking both the fascinating and menacing aspects of a gravity-bound aesthetic. Artists such as Byron Kim (in his *Belly Painting [White]*, 1998) and John Coplans (in his *Self-Portrait [Upside Down No. 1]*, 1992) depict bodies in tense dialogue with gravity, where flesh struggles to maintain vertical integrity in the face of gravity's inexorable pull toward the horizontal. Erwin Wurm, in his photograph *One Minute Sculptures (Suitcase on Woman)* (1998), demonstrates gravity's conquest over the human form as everyday objects, in a perverse reversal, become weighty, inescapably constraining human mobility.

These two tendencies in gravity-oriented representation—the conceptualized use of gravity on the one

hand and its literal representation in photography and painting on the other—address the intersection of gravity on sculptural objects as well as on the human form in the 1960s and the 1990s. The force of gravity's draw continues to attract, captivate, tantalize, and repel artists and viewers alike. As Richard Serra maintained, the art object's necessary relationship to gravity records “the history of art as a history of the particularization of weight.”⁴

1. The term Postminimalism (sometimes referred to as Process Art) refers to an informal movement—predominantly manifest in sculpture—that can be dated roughly from 1965 to 1975. Postminimalists emphasized the entropic, the organic, and the malleable. Where the forms of Minimalism were cold, rigid, and autonomous, Postminimalism's “soft” forms accentuated the random and pliable qualities of the art object.

2. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture,” in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (1968; ed. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p. 224.

3. Yve-Alain Bois, “Thermometers Should Last Forever,” in Edward Ruscha: *Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966–1969*, exh. cat. (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1993), p. 29.

4. Richard Serra, *Writings, Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 184.

Like the wind, gravity is a powerful yet invisible force. Its existence, therefore, can only be proven through its effects. Under gravity's pull, a jellyfish, diaphanous in water, becomes an amorphous mass on land. In its absence in outer space, water becomes an amoebic floating plasm. The ancient Greek myth of Icarus, who fell to his death by flying too close to the sun with wings of wax and feathers, tells of the peril in opposing gravity's laws. Artists addressed gravity even before physicists explained it, for sculptors needed to locate the center of balance in freestanding works. Zero-G is the state of gravity at rest, an equilibrium between gravitational and opposing forces. The art in "Zero-G: When Gravity Becomes Form" makes this invisible power visible as a static opposition to surface in traditional sculpture, an embodied resistance and defiance in dance and performance art, and a visual recording of the opposing gestures of falling and flying in photography and video. In works involving magnets and gravitational fields, the medium is gravity itself. Tom Shannon's *Serene in Suspense* (1998) levitates in zero-G. Oriented toward magnetic north, the colorless, life-size female figure lies horizontally suspended by a single wire from her abdomen. She spins, rises, and falls at the slightest touch, in perfect balance with counterweights, magnets, and gravity.

Through the use of materials such as latex rubber and plastic, the properties of contemporary sculpture now

On Tweaking Gravity and Visualizing the Unseen

Ko'an Jeff Baysa, M.D.

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Tom Shannon, *Serene in Suspense*, 1998





Eva Mantell, *Venus and the Vacuum*, 1994 and 1999

include lightness, buoyancy, pliability, and impermanence. The light weight allows a certain freedom from gravity, and sculptures can be displayed off the ground or free floating when filled with helium. Freedom from gravity is sometimes associated with freedom from reason, and inflatable sculpture can thus be deployed as a strategy in humor. Nancy Davidson distorts characteristics of Elvis Presley with *Elvissa* (1997–98), a canted, suspended, 8-foot tall, corseted blue weather balloon with plastic chest hairs and a 6-inch inflation nozzle. In *Balloon Self-Portrait* (1993), Tim Hawkinson creates another version of himself by everting and inflating his own latex rubber body cast. Hung from a spring, the flesh-colored sculpture is a bloated exteriorized empty skin,

a self-portrait bearing scant resemblance to the artist. In Eva Mantell's photograph, *Venus and the Vacuum* (1994 and 1999), the artist, groomed in an outmoded fashion, poses next to an upright vacuum cleaner. Her red dress is augmented with pink plastic bags that inflate along with the dustbag when the vacuum is on. However, the air-filled bags neither lift nor bear her away. The artist remains rooted—glamorous, blissful, and oblivious in the role of a disposable receptacle for dirt and debris.

By taking everyday objects to abnormal heights, suspended art installations increase the threat of gravity's invisible power. Addressing the issues of depicting temporality and reality in photographs,

Simon Lee layers time, photo documentation, and simulacrum in *Necklace* (1991 and 1999), a manipulated print of a large drawing of the installation, upon which he collaged a small photograph of a work done in 1991. The original image shows a string of used mattresses suspended horizontally from an overpass, alluding to the dreams and precarious lives of the unsheltered homeless people below. The vacant mattresses soar and sway like magic carpets high above the ground.

In two-dimensional works, the peril of falling can be parodied by depicting mannequins or absurd situations. Since 1985, many of Robert Yarber's paintings have dealt with falling and flight. Cartoonlike figures

painted in neon colors leap or fall from buildings, while others float in space. *Corporeals* (1998) incorporates inkjet printing and digital imaging technology to produce large, detailed, colorful prints that arguably rival paintings. It shows a doll-like couple in evening clothes tumbling to earth above a deserted twilight landscape, their inverted postures and the female's facial expression frozen in a flash of light. Likewise, the ambiguity of a body's orientation in space is seen in Robert Longo's lithograph, *Eric* (1984), which portrays a young man in a shirt and tie collapsing downward and inward against a seamless white background. His body is twisted and his tie flies out; his head is down and his arms flail. Is he dancing, or has he just been shot?

a photograph of an emergency crew wearing hard hats at an alleged crash site. Because of the lawless manipulation of gravity, one's relationship to reality is questioned along with issues of truth and objectivity in photography.

Dancing is a graceful and vigorous defiance of gravity. In *Ying and Yang Separated* (1997), photographer Sergio Goes freezes a female dancer's two mirroring leaps in a single frame, rendering the same figure suspended in midair into distinctly different masculine and feminine semblances. Resisting gravity can also take a less kinetic form. Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures* series consists of photographs of his temporary time-based performances. *Hanging*

Sergio Goes, *Ying and Yang Separated*, 1997

Photography also allows the unseen forces of gravity to become visible by freezing an action or instant, sometimes in seemingly impossible situations. Peter Garfield's amazing photographs of airborne (falling or rising?) mobile homes are captured moments in time. In *Mobile Home (Brainstorm)* (1995), a child faces the camera, unaware of the impending cataclysm, as an entire home in the sky behind him plummets toward his suburban neighborhood. The three realities of the boy, the viewer, and the photographer come clashing together. The photographs, however, are hoaxes, staged with suspended miniature models and blurred images. Additionally, Garfield published a book entitled *Harsh Realty* (1998) that provides false documentation of the dashed buildings by including





Helène Aylon, *Breaking with Greatest Resistance*, 1980 (detail)

Picture (1998) shows a man desperately gripping the sides of a wall panel, as he draws his legs under him and off the floor. We concede that his tragicomic gesture is futile, for fatigue and gravity will inevitably overcome his best efforts.

Gravity has a constant covert presence, and its cumulative effects become increasingly apparent with passing time. John Coplans' photograph from the *Upside Down* series (1992) details gravity's inexorable tug on flesh over time. The truncated view of his upended, hirsute nude body is compressed within the boundaries of the image, further emphasizing the sagging tension of aging skin. Even his inverted position offers no quarter from gravity's relentless draw.

The root word for gravity and gravid (pregnant) is *gravis*, meaning "heavy." The static, swollen abdomen of Byron Kim's *Belly Painting (White)* (1998) is distended downward by pregnancy, demonstrating our subjugation to gravity even prior to birth. Helène Aylon's cathartic works in her *Breaking* series have been compared to the birth process in their progressive, gravity-driven downward movement toward delivery. *Breaking with Greatest Resistance* (1980) is a combination of performance, painting, and sculpture. Poured linseed oil forms a membrane after a month of stasis on a horizontal paper-covered acrylic sheet. Assistants tilt the surface upright and the formed sac first sags then bursts in a gush of liquid. Aylon narrates the process, collecting the dripping, oozing

excess in a pan. The resulting sculptural, membranous surface is exhibited. The *Breaking* works differ in the varying ways that the sac forms and empties, a painting largely independent of the artist's hand. The process as performance is documented on videotape. The vigorous interaction of paint, surface, and gravity

If all is subject to gravity's inescapable attraction, then our fall is a foregone conclusion. We spend our entire lives dealing with gravity; laid out in death, we succumb to it. The art in this exhibition allows the unseen force of gravity to be visualized through its effects, enacted in struggle and at play.

Hanneline Rogeberg, *Pink Matters*, 1995–97

is similarly seen in Paul Henry Ramirez's 1997 untitled painting from his *Liquid Squeeze Series*. He puts a twist on the drips, spills, and splatters of 1950s Action Painting by allowing his colorful hard edge shapes to interact with each other—melting, staining, sweating, squirting, and drooping.

An armature enables forms to remain upright against gravity without collapsing. Lee Boroson's armatureless *Chair* (1995) is a soft, fabric sculpture of an ordinarily utilitarian object hanging flaccidly on the wall, its useless, drooping legs barely grazing the floor. In traditional Southeast Asian dance instruction, the students learn intricate sinuous movements by passively resting their limbs directly on those of the performing teacher, acting literally as support. Alluding to this concept, Hanneline Rogeberg's painting *Pink Matters* (1995–97), depicts a pair of imposing, fleshy nude women striding together, nearly indistinguishably intertwined. One is the armature, the other the deadweight, passenger, and partner.



One aspect of artistic practice is the investigation of the nature of reality, an investigation that begins with the question “How do we know the world?” In contemporary art history, the experience of art has become more explicit and complicated than simply gazing at a piece installed on a wall or on a pedestal. Beginning in the early 1960s, an interest in the literal interpretation of natural phenomena freed the art object from two-dimensional and/or static representation, bringing live action, and its documentation in photographs, video, and film, into visual art practice. The performance art movement, as these initiatives came to be called, was an offshoot of the Postminimal era in New York, which espoused dissatisfaction with the austerity of formalist aesthetics. In essence, performance artists attempted to operate outside of the art establishment, subverting conventional artistic tastes by taking the art object off the pristine walls of galleries and museums.¹ The artist, as a live art object, became a self-reflexive embodiment of the process of making and understanding art. The act was prioritized, as artists began to conduct experiential explorations of real-life events. Commonplace activity and bodily gestures ceased to be seen merely as subject, and became instead the media of art.

With the advent of video recording in the early 1970s, performance artists began to exhibit their works on monitors, introducing a *performative art form*—which differs from performance art itself. The latter is a

Gravity

Michelle-Lee White

as a Performative Experience

non-reproductive art that involves live action in real time and space. Its aesthetic is in an emphatic present that is time- and space-specific. Once a performance is documented in photograph, video, or film, however, and exhibited in place of the live art form, it is altered and becomes performative. The elements of time and space in performative art

become complicated by a constructed reality that relies on repetition, memory, or the implication of an action.² The specificity of space and time in performative art is measured by sequences of prosaic and poetic acts experienced directly by the artist and indirectly by the viewer. In performative art, the artist becomes both subject and object, thereby unveiling

Vito Acconci, *Throw*, 1969



new active ways of visualizing the human relationship to the natural world.

It is through performance that natural phenomena such as gravity enter into the art experience, which is communicated through the use of narrative (describing the experience) and reflexive contemplation (exploring the experience). The investigation of gravity, therefore, is not only a subject of the art object but, as a determinant of form, part of the art object itself.

The telling of an experience is self-referential, having a specific and subjective dimension of time and space. When a narrative is constructed the author composes units of descriptive action. In the case of the performative art object, these units become framed acts tempered by the artist's perspective.

The mixed-media photograph *Throw* (1969) by Vito Acconci literally interprets the word as action. The viewer is not given an image of the act of throwing an object; rather, the two snapshots of the surrounding buildings and intersecting streets are taken from the perspective of a camera thrown into the air. The skewed composition and blurring objects suggest an action-based visual aesthetic that demonstrates arrested motion from a primary source.

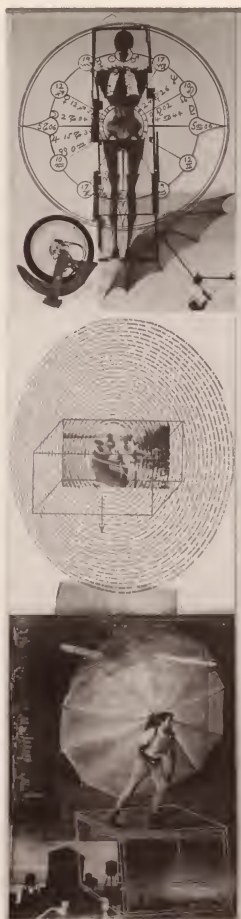
Robert Rauschenberg's *Autobiography* (1967) illustrates an image that refers to his attempt to harness speed and lift. The three lithographed images depict a cryptic diagram; a text, listing important people and events in his life, that spiral around a picture of

the artist with his parents; and a photograph of the artist on rollerskates while wearing a parachute that was taken from his performance *Pelican* (1963). The diagram on the top and the image of the artist on rollerskates depict his interrogative efforts to understand gravity. In Martin Kersels' *Untitled (Falling Photos-Triptych)* (1994–96), the body is the primary active referent. In a series of three enlarged photographs, Kersels records the fall of a large man (quite possibly himself). The viewer witnesses the act of falling through a frame-by-frame action sequence. The concept of an inevitable fall is implied but never portrayed, creating a sense of anticipation and suspense.

Within the format of the narrative, some artists have alluded to the experience of gravity by illustrating its ultimate effects. In *Untitled* (1996), a photograph by Tom Friedman, the viewer is presented with the image of a rural landscape with a gaping hole created by a falling human body. Unlike Kersels, who shows his audience the act of falling, Friedman implies a fall. Descriptive clues such as the body outline with arms and legs spread, and the amount of displaced soil indicate a desperate fall to the earth from a great height. Hélène Aylon's installation *Breaking with Greatest Resistance* (1980) illustrates the residue of the interaction between media and gravity. Linseed oil was poured onto a paper-covered acrylic sheet and left to dry for a month, allowing a sheath of dried oil to form. When the sheet was tilted forward, the sheath became a resistant barrier against the

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Robert Rauschenberg, *Autobiography*, 1967



remaining fluid, much like an amniotic sac. Over time, the gravitational pressure of the fluid broke the sheath, creating a patch of spilled fluid. Its residual presence references the original performance—the artist pouring the oil—which was documented on videotape. Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures (Suitcase on Woman)* (1998) comically represents the certain descent of any object thrown into the air. The image depicts a woman lying motionless beneath a fallen suitcase. Here, Wurm alludes to the heavy impact of the valise on the poor unsuspecting soul who didn't have time to get out of the way.

Reflexive performative art constructs and elicits meaning by creating a meditative space in which we reflect on our relationship to the natural world. Rather than telling a story, the reflexive object folds into itself and investigates the experience of gravity.³ In Tom Shannon's *Serene in Suspense* (1998), a sculpted female body floats in stationary position a few feet from the floor, sharing space with the viewer. The balance between gravity and antigravity is poetic and redolent of the magic show, where the

magician's assistant levitates in front of an awed audience. Shannon's piece inspires a sense of meditative grandeur as the seemingly weightless body (actually suspended on a thin wire) hovers in the gallery. Shannon successfully gives the figure a simultaneous sense of weight and weightlessness, which is achieved by the manipulation of magnetic fields placed at strategic points in the sculpted form: at the slightest touch, the figure topples and rotates to maintain its equilibrium. Eliza Proctor makes sequential images of toppling and falling. In *Triptych* (1992), a long, draping textile depicts a fall in progression from the ceiling to the floor of the gallery. On the panel, life-size photogrammed figures appear in helpless falling form. The quiet and meditative atmosphere of the installation elicits both sympathy and empathy for the figures, a sensation emphasized by dramatic lighting and the drawn-out drama of the fall.

Gravity and antigravity have been explored by a number of artists through photographic effects that force viewers to reconsider what is being shown

opposite page: Eliza Proctor, *Triptych*, 1992
Vandyke brown print, cotton, and steel, three images,
36 x 192 in. (91.4 x 487.7 cm) each
Collection of the artist

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Gravity as a Performative Experience

Michelle-Lee White

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Tom Friedman, *Untitled*, 1996

and what they see. Tom Friedman uses *trompe l'oeil* in *Untitled* (1994), in which a weightless male helplessly rises face forward to the ceiling. The levitating body is trapped by the confines of the room. This rather impossible scenario was composed by inverting a photograph of a man lying on the floor in a constricting position. Dexter Buell's videotaped performance *Treadmill/Zootrope #2 (Eggbeater)* (1997) tampers with perception by mounting a camera on the inner track of a circular treadmill. With a cloth wrapped around his lower torso, Buell runs on the treadmill, creating the sound of scraping gears and cracking wood. Due to the angle and placement of the camera, Buell seems to be repeatedly rising and falling on the circular path. The viewer gets a sense

that the artist is running upside down. However, this is only a camera effect, amplified by continuous repetition. Tony Oursler's *Underwater Head* (1997) uses projection to create an eerie sense of dislocation. A face is projected onto the ceramic egg shape immersed in distilled water, visually engaging the audience with a fierce stare that brings the small harmless object to life.

The narratives and investigations selected here produce an engagement with a new medium—the objectified artist—and allow a performative experiential element into the exhibition space. In these works, the experience is gravity, and its effects on the human body are communicated through prosaic

narrative or poetic reflexivity. The image or implication of falling, flying, sagging, and floating objects acknowledges the omnipresence of physical properties that affect our existence and the way we experience the world—on or above its surface.

Tony Oursler, *Underwater Head*, 1997



1. The term performance art was first used to refer to live art productions by visual artists in the early 1960s in the United States and was analogous to the Conceptual, Pop, and Process art movements which emphasized the idea of art over the object.

2. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 146–48.

3. Paraphrased from Phyllis Gorfain, "Play and the Problem of Knowing in *Hamlet*: An Excursion into Interpretive Anthropology," in Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, eds., *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 209–10.

Dimensions are in inches followed by centimeters,
height precedes width precedes depth

Vito Acconci (b. 1940)

Throw, 1969

Two gelatin silver prints and text on paper,

19 x 19 (48.3 x 48.3) overall

Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Helène Aylon (b. 1931)

Breaking with Greatest Resistance, 1980

Linseed oil, paper, masonite, and plexiglass,

96 x 72 (243.8 x 182.9)

Collection of the artist

Lynda Benglis (b. 1941)

Wing, 1969 (cast 1975)

Cast aluminum, 67 x 59 1/4 x 60

(170.2 x 150.5 x 152.4)

Cheim & Read, New York

Lee Boroson (b. 1963)

Choir, 1995

Velvet and nylon webbing, 90 x 12 x 7

(228.6 x 30.5 x 17.8)

Collection of the artist

Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911)

Soft Landscape I, 1967

Plastic, 4 x 12 x 11 (10.2 x 30.5 x 27.9)

Cheim & Read, New York

Dexter Buell (b. 1960)

Treadmill/Zootrope #2 (Eggbeater), 1997

Videotape, color, sound, 9 minutes

Collection of the artist; courtesy DeChiara/Stewart, New York

John Coplans (b. 1920)

Self-Portrait (Upside Down No. 1), 1992

Gelatin silver print, 85 x 43 (215.9 x 109.2)

Collection of the artist; courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery,

New York

Works in the Exhibition

Nancy Davidson (b. 1943)
Elvissa, 1997–98
Latex, fabric, and rope,
96 x 60 x 60 (243.8 x 152.4 x 152.4)
Collection of the artist; courtesy Shoshana Wayne
Gallery, Santa Monica

Tom Friedman (b. 1965)
Untitled, 1994
Gelatin silver print, 35 x 25 (88.9 x 63.5)
Private collection; courtesy Feature, Inc., New York

Untitled, 1996
C-print, 3 x 4 1/4 (7.6 x 10.8)
Feature, Inc., New York

Peter Garfield (b. 1961)
Mobile Home (Brainstorm), 1995
C-print, 40 x 30 (101.6 x 76.2)
Feigen Contemporary, New York

Mobile Home (Manifest Destiny), 1996
C-print, 40 x 30 (101.6 x 76.2)
Feigen Contemporary, New York

Mobile Home (Safe), 1997
C-print, 41 1/4 x 31 1/4 (104.8 x 79.4)
Feigen Contemporary, New York

Sergio Goes (b. 1964)
Ying and Yang Separated, 1997
Gelatin silver print, 15 x 15 (38.1 x 38.1)
Collection of the artist

Tim Hawkinson (b. 1960)
Bolloon Self-Portrait, 1993
Latex and air, dimensions variable
Ace Gallery, New York

Martin Kersels (b. 1960)
Untitled (Falling Photos-Triptych), 1994–96
Three gelatin silver prints, 41 x 72 (104.1 x 182.9) each
Collection of Marvin Kosmin and Alice Kosmin;
courtesy Gorney Bravin & Lee, New York

Byron Kim (b. 1961)
Belly Painting (White), 1998
Encaustic on linen on panel, 11 x 8 x 4 1/2
(27.9 x 20.3 x 11.4)
Collection of the artist; courtesy Max Protetch
Gallery, New York

Simon Lee (b. 1956)
Necklace, 1991 and 1999
Photocollage, 36 x 48 (91.4 x 121.9)
Collection of the artist

Charles Long (b. 1958)
Blow-up, 1995
Brass and alloy, 56 x 22 x 15 (142.2 x 55.9 x 38.1)
Private collection, New York; courtesy Bonakdar Jancou Gallery,
New York

Robert Longo (b. 1958)
Eric, 1984
Lithograph, 68 x 39 (172.7 x 99.1)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 84.54

Eva Mantell (b. 1963)
Venus and the Vacuum, 1994 and 1999
Iris print, 36 x 24 (91.4 x 61)
Collection of the artist

Robert Morris (b. 1931)
Untitled, 1974
Felt, 78 x 144 x 20 (198.1 x 365.8 x 50.8)
Jay Chiat Foundation, New York

Ernesto Neto (b. 1964)
Poff, 1997
Stocking and wheat flour,
44 x 44 x 8 (111.8 x 111.8 x 20.3)
Private collection; courtesy Bonakdar Jancou Gallery, New York

Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929)

Soft Toilet, 1966

Vinyl, plexiglass, and kapok on painted wood base,
57 1/16 x 27 5/8 x 28 1/16 (144.9 x 70.2 x 71.3) overall
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; 50th
Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Victor W. Ganz '79 83a-b

Tony Oursler (b. 1957)

Underwater Head, 1997

Glass jar, glazed ceramic, water, laserdisc, laserdisc
player, and video projector, dimensions variable
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Commissioned by the Whitney Museum of American Art
and Cartier, Inc. 97.85a-f

Eliza Proctor (b. 1962)

Translight, 1999

Vandyke brown print and cotton, 900 x 20 (2286 x 50.8)
Collection of the artist

Paul Henry Ramirez (b. 1963)

Untitled (Liquid Squeeze Series), 1997

Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 42 (106.7 x 106.7)
Caren Golden Fine Art, New York

Robert Rauschenberg (b. 1925)

Autobiography, 1967

Color offset photolithograph,
199 3/8 x 49 (506.4 x 124.5)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
Gift of Broadside Art, Inc. 68 68

Hanneline Rogeberg (b. 1963)

Pink Matters, 1995-97

Oil on canvas, 96 x 72 (243.8 x 182.9)
Collection of the artist

Michal Rovner (b. 1957)

Land-Marks, 1999

Canvas print, 47 x 47 (119.4 x 119.4)
Collection of the artist

Richard Serra (b. 1939)

Prop, 1968

Lead antimony, 97 1/2 x 60 x 43 (247.7 x 152.4 x 109.2)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;
Purchase, with funds from the Howard and Jean Lipman
Foundation, Inc. 69.20a-b

Tom Shannon (b. 1947)

Serene in Suspense, 1998

Aqua resin, glass, encapsulated lead, paint,
magnet, stainless steel cable, and aluminum, 172 x 96 1/8 x 2
(436.9 x 244.2 x 5.1)
Collection of Joan and Alvin Einbender

Robert Smithson (1938-1973)

Second Upside-down Tree, 1969

Cibachrome, 14 x 14 (35.6 x 35.6)
John Weber Gallery, New York

Erwin Wurm (b. 1954)

One Minute Sculptures (Hanging Picture), 1998

C-print, 17 3/4 x 11 3/4 (45.1 x 29.8)
Lombard-Freid Fine Arts, New York

One Minute Sculptures (Suitcase on Woman), 1998

C-print, 17 3/4 x 11 3/4 (45.1 x 29.8)
Collection of Jane Lombard

Robert Yarber (b. 1948)

Corporeals, 1998

Oil and acrylic on inkjet on canvas, 48 x 72 (121.9 x 182.9)
Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Acknowledgments

Ko'an Jeff Baysa
Eva Diaz
Michelle-Lee White

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Stamford, Connecticut 06921
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Peter Garfield, *Mobile Home (Brainstorm)*, 1995 (detail)